

Thirty Years of Healing, Hope, Laughter and Peace

We are celebrating today and I am so thankful I get to be a part of the celebration! I want to thank the deacon board for their kindness and generosity expressed to us. Paula and I will certainly enjoy the trip. The truth is, we've been enjoying the trip for a long time now. They tell me we are celebrating thirty years of pastoring Carbondale and I can't dispute the facts but it still seems hard to believe.

I think of 2015 as a year of significant zeros. April 7 was 30 years since you elected us as your pastors. May 1 I will turn 60. May 31 Paula and I will celebrate our 40th wedding anniversary and then December 31, we will actually celebrate 40 years of serving on the pastoral staff of this church. That is a lifetime!

I was going to actually wrap up the We Believe series this morning but some level of dismay was expressed around the office, or at least by some people that were standing in my office, that I was not planning to reflect on thirty years of pastoring. As I thought about it, I decided they were right. Sarah said, "We are celebrating thirty years and it's a pretty big deal." You know what, it is a big deal and we should celebrate today. But let me explain what I think the big deal is and what we should be celebrating.

I'm always amused when someone tells a person's advanced age and then says, "Let's give them a hand." We are applauding someone for not dying yet. Basically what they did to earn that celebration or that applause was to keep breathing steadily and consistently day after day. How do you get to celebrate being pastor for thirty years? Keep breathing steadily and consistently day after day (and get re-elected every three years). I want to celebrate today, but here is what I'm going to celebrate.

I celebrate His church. Carbondale Assembly of God, part of the holy, catholic, apostolic church. I celebrate the life and the history of this fellowship of which I have been a part since 1967. In case you don't know, my parents and I moved to Tulsa in the summer of 1967 and immediately began attending Carbondale Assembly. The church was still located in its original location at that time and this facility was being completed. I spent my teenaged years here. I met Paula in the youth group here. My dearest friends were part of the youth group of this church. Paula and I were married here in May of 1975 and traveled that summer preaching revivals. When September rolled around I went back to school at ORU and Paula went to work to put me through college. In August of 1975 Bro. and Sis. McQueen came to Carbondale as our

pastors and at the end of December of 1975 he hired us to serve as youth pastors. Upon graduation from ORU in May of 1977 we were asked to remain on staff and a year or two after that we were asked to be the assistant pastors to Bro. McQueen. The girls were born during that time and we learned so much working with the McQueens. In January of 1985 Bro. McQueen suffered a stroke and eventually felt he needed to step down and on Easter Sunday, April 7, 1985, you elected us as your pastors. Thirty years ago. That's how it all began. With the exception of a brief period in 1974 when I was the youth pastor at Lewis Ave. Assembly of God, I have been a part of this church in some form or fashion for 48 years.

I celebrate this church, not because I am the pastor, because Paula and I were already a part of the church before we were asked to serve as pastors or youth pastors. I celebrate this church because of who you are, who we are together! This is a place of healing and hope and laughter and peace. I have no regrets about being a part of this church. I've heard all the criticism about church being judgmental and intolerant, but I've watched this church love people, accept people, bless people, serve people, regardless of their race, creed, sexual preference or anything else. We will tell you the truth yes, so if that is hateful or exclusive, so be it, but in the 48 years I've been a part of this church, I've seen the love and mercy of Christ in action far more often than I've seen the opposite.

I celebrate this church. In 48 years I've never had a reason or cause to be ashamed of this church or its' pastors. I've never felt reluctant to share with anyone the name of my church.

I celebrate the mission and purpose of this church. It has never been about building our own kingdom, but rather building His! I have watched our church reach out to the community and to the world in ministry, in sharing and giving. We have literally given millions of dollars to missions and outreach. We have given our sons and daughters to missions and ministry. We have sent out workers and teams, mothered churches, partnered with congregations around the city and around the world to build His church and advance His cause, His kingdom!

I celebrate this church! The stand Carbondale has taken over the years to hold to sound doctrine and not be swayed by fads or deceived by frauds. We've found our way through all the struggles and changes of life and culture by always looking to God's word, by depending upon the direction of the Holy Spirit, by listening to wise counsel.

I celebrate this church and may I tell you this morning – we all need the church! More than ever we need the church. We need the instruction of the church. Without it we are lost in a

moral and ethical wilderness without a compass. What is the basis for your moral and ethical decisions? “Well, I try to ask myself, ‘What would Blake Shelton do?’” Right? That should take care of it. “What would Kim and Kanye do? What would Phil Robertson do?” Do you want your children to make the guiding decisions of their life, decisions that determine the course of their life and their eternal destiny, based on the opinions of their friends or their favorite reality tv celebrity? They are going to make those decision based on something and it needs to be the teaching of God’s word. The best chance you’ve got as parents is to live for Jesus and live according to God’s word, but don’t forget the church! Whether you are single or married, parents or not, we need the church! I celebrate the programs and life and teaching of this church. I’m a product of this church and it’s faithful proclamation of the gospel!

We need the fellowship of the church. I said earlier my dearest friends were and still are in this church. My life has been lived in this church and I have no regrets about that. Is it always easy or convenient, sharing life with a church family? No. While working on the sermon Friday morning I spent about an hour and a half on the phone dealing with various problems of church members in crisis, but that’s part of being a family, bearing one another’s burdens, caring for each other. The benefits far out weigh the troubles. I’ve never faced a situation in my life, good or bad, where I thought, “I’ll have no one to help me.” I have a church family I can turn to. Get involved, get connected. Become part of the fellowship and the life of this church!

We need the nurturing life of the church the way a child needs the nurturing of a mother and father. We need the sacraments of the church, baptism and holy communion. I was baptized in this church. I have met the Lord time and time again in communion as we have come to the Lord’s table, nurtured and sustained by the gift of his presence and his grace. I celebrate not just thirty years of pastoring, but 48 years of healing, hope, laughter and peace with the people of God and the Carbondale family. I need the church and so do you.

I celebrate the mentors. You know everyone needs mentors in their life, someone who will be a friend and counselor, an example you look to for guidance and direction. Carbondale has supplied mentors in my life. I have to say first of all, thank God for my parents. I celebrate the lives of JC and Thelma Taylor, the godliest people I’ve ever known. They were the greatest influence and shapers of my life. But this church has always had mentors, pillars of the church that have faced the storms and challenges of life with faith, courage, strength, gentleness, graciousness, integrity. If we are to celebrate thirty years of pastoring then I must celebrate my

pastors: Pastor H. D. Pieratt that gave me an opportunity to minister as a teenager in the church. It occurred to me I've had a key to the church since I was about 15 or 16. Bro. Pieratt trusted us as teenagers to be up here and allowed us to start holding prayer meetings on our own. He allowed me to sing and preach as a teenager in this church.

I celebrate Pastor J. L. McQueen who hired me first as a youth pastor and then as his associate. He trusted me, stood up for me, mentored and taught me and finally promoted me, believing that I was to be the next pastor. I must celebrate Sis. McQueen who has been a mentor and supporter and encourager and prayer warrior for Paula and myself. No pastor ever had a more godly friend or advocate than Margie McQueen.

I think of deacons and leaders over the years that God placed in this church to help lead this congregation forward and I celebrate their faithful service and counsel. I began to think of the great men of this church who have served on the board in years past. Faithful, godly, men of prayer, men of integrity, men you could look up to, worthy of honor. These were pillars of the church. Here is the problem: many of these faithful leaders, these mentors and pillars of the church have gone on to heaven already. I mentioned pastors and deacons, but it was not just men of God, but faithful women as well who have been leaders and pillars in this church. There are so many that we all valued as people who lived holy, godly lives. We looked up to them. These were the people we aspired to be like, the people we pointed out to our children as examples of godly living. Now they are gone. Who will take their place? Who among us will the next generation have as mentors? Who will be the pillars of the church for the coming generations? Will you be one? Will you live a life of holiness, a life worthy of being an example to others in the church? We need pillars. We need mentors. We need humble servant leaders who will live their lives in a way that brings honor to God and to His church. And speaking of servants...

I celebrate the servants. If we are going to celebrate 30 years then we must celebrate the awesome pastoral staff and administrative staff that have worked alongside us over the past thirty years – dedicated, gifted, talented people that served in a million different ways without much credit or recognition. They made me look better than I deserved and made this church the blessing that it has been to so many over the years. Not only the pastors and paid staff, but the hundreds of volunteers and servants of every type: deacons and teachers, children and youth workers, nursery attendants, greeters and ushers, custodians, cooks and servants of a thousand different varieties that have served the Lord by serving the church and the community. I

celebrate all of the servants today. Time may cause me to forget, but the Lord will never forget and heaven celebrates the servants today.

I have to add that if we are going to celebrate thirty years today, I have to celebrate my family. I haven't done this alone. Paula is the unsung hero in all of this. Thirty years of pastoring and forty years of marriage and ministry with Paula faithfully at my side! She has quietly and consistently weathered the storms that have come. She has listened and loved, prayed and trusted God and through it all remained kind, faithful, devoted and beautiful on the inside and the outside.

Sarah and Rebekah, I celebrate the gift you two are to me and your mom on a daily basis. How blessed we are to have two beautiful daughters that in spite of having been raised in a pastor's home, you still love God, love his church and love your parents. I know it has a lot to do with your mother, but I think it also has something to do with the uniqueness of this particular church. I'm glad we can celebrate together. Finally, and above it all,

I celebrate the Lord's great mercy. I've said at different times that I really don't know how to pastor a church. Some of you would agree I know. I don't have administrative or executive giftings. I'm not a visionary or a great man of faith. I've said at times that I don't know how it all came to be that I'm still here after 30 years or 40 years, depending on how you look at it. I just know how to play piano and sing a little bit, preach a little bit and pray. That's what I started doing and for whatever reason, by God's great mercy and grace, he allowed me to keep doing that and you chose to let me stick around and do that here.

There is a story of mercy in 2 Samuel 9 that has always been a favorite and somehow I've always identified with this guy. In the story Israel's king Saul has been killed in battle. Saul was paranoid and jealous of David and had been trying to kill David because he saw him as a threat to his throne. After Saul's death, David was made king over all of Israel and God gave him victory over all of his enemies. Unlike most ancient kings who would have the family members of the former king executed out of fear, David asks, **“Is there anyone still left of the house of Saul to whom I can show kindness for Jonathan's sake?” 2 Samuel 9:1**

A former servant of Saul's named Ziba told David there was a son of Jonathan who was still alive. That means he is a grandson of Saul the former king. His name was Mephibosheth and Ziba added that he was crippled in both feet. This was probably Ziba's way of saying, “If you are thinking of killing him, this man isn't a threat to you. He is crippled.” He was a little

boy when his father Jonathan and grandfather Saul were killed in battle. Saul's family had to flee and the woman carrying Mephibosheth fell and his feet were crushed, leaving him crippled for the rest of his life.

When David found out where Mephibosheth was living, he sent men to bring him to David in Jerusalem. I'm sure Mephibosheth thought this was probably the end after all these years. Someone found out who he was and where he lived and had ratted him out to David. Instead, David says to him, **"Don't be afraid, for I will surely show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan. I will restore to you all the land that belonged to your grandfather Saul, and you will always eat at my table."**

"Mephibosheth bowed down and said, 'What is your servant that you should notice a dead dog like me?'" 2 Samuel 9:7-8

David summoned the servant Ziba and told him, "I have given your master's grandson everything that belonged to Saul and his family...and Mephibosheth, grandson of your master will always eat at my table."

The bible then says, **"So Mephibosheth ate at David's table like one of the king's sons...And Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, because he always ate at the king's table, and he was crippled in both feet." 2 Samuel 9:11, 13**

I know you are wondering what in the world this has to do with celebrating thirty years of pastoring or why this is a favorite story so let me explain as we conclude. This is a story of forgiveness and mercy and kindness and grace. Here is this crippled guy, nothing special about him. The only thing that kept him alive was the fact he was Jonathan's son. And yet David chose to love him. He provided for him. He brought him to the palace and Mephibosheth ate at the king's table, where those fine tablecloths of the king covered his crippled legs, where he sat there and feasted like one of the kings sons. In his heart he must have thought, "I don't deserve this. I'm not worthy of sitting at the kings table, but by his mercy and grace, he has brought me here and seated me here and here I will stay...by his grace."

And that's where I am. For thirty years I've been this crippled guy, undeserving in a million ways and unqualified in a couple of million more and yet for some reason beyond me, God has allowed me to be the pastor of this great church. He has allowed me to sit down with my crippled feet under his glorious table. He and you have allowed me to stand behind this pulpit for thirty years, as flawed as I am, and try my best to speak the truth and bring honor to the

Lord. I've tried to warn and encourage, to bring hope and to make sense out of some of the heartaches and tragedies we've shared that don't always make much sense. If there has been any success in it, beyond my continuing to breathe in and out for thirty years, then it has been strictly because of God's amazing mercy and grace. Like Mephibosheth, with my crippled feet safely under the king's table, I feast upon his riches and celebrate his goodness!

The truth is, that's where all of us are. Undeserving of mercy and grace and forgiveness and yet God invites us to come and feast at his table. Like David asking if there was someone to whom he could show mercy for Jonathan's sake, God says, **“Is there anyone to whom I can show kindness and forgiveness and mercy for Jesus's sake?”** And through the blood of Jesus, He extends his mercy and covers our sin, our crippled feet. Now by his grace, we eat at the king's table. Always.

Today we celebrate thirty years of His healing, hope, laughter and peace. If you haven't experienced his forgiveness, his mercy, his healing and hope and laughter and peace, I invite you to open your heart and life to Christ today. He wants to show his kindness to you if you will accept his invitation. Come to him. Repent of your sins and place your faith in Christ as your Savior and Lord. He will save you and you will eat at the king's table always. Thanks be to God!